Acceptable Religion illuſtrated and recommended.

A

SERMON

PREACHED AT

ST. THOMAS's, JAN. 1, 1770.

For the BENEFIT of the

CHARITY-SCHOOL

In GRAVEL-LANE, SOUTHWARK.

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BRITISH MUSEUM

A

SERMON.

1 Cor. ix. 24. latter part.

So run that ye may obtain.

MEN of different tempers have entertained very oppoſite ſentiments of religion; and it is difficult to ſay which are the moſt diſhonourable and dangerous:—thoſe whoſe minds are of a melancholy and dejected caſt, the leading features of which are ſelf-diffidence and dread, have given to religion a gloomy and forbidding aſpect; they have dreſſed it in robes of the ſame black and mournful hue with that of their own apprehenſions, and repreſented it as difficult of acceſs—rigorous in its requirements—ſevere in its cenſures—ſlow and parſimonious in communicating its joys: theſe views have deterred them from any intercourſe with the dreaded enemy of their eaſe and happineſs.—Whilſt others of a more lively and ſanguine diſpoſition have decked it in light, airy, and attractive veſtments;—have immoderately reduced and ſoftened its authority and obligations, and circumſcribed its laws within very narrow bounds;—they exclude from their idea of religion every thing harſh and unpleaſing, and allow none of thoſe demands which enjoin any degree of ſelf-denial, mortification, and labour:—

all its paths, they fondly imagine, are ſtrewed with flowers; its pleaſures they deem near of acceſs, and eaſy to be acquired; and thoſe reſtraints or requirements which it ſeems to demand, of lax and flexible obligation;—happineſs, they are ready to conclude, to be its indiſcriminate object, and as long as this is purſued, however low and unworthy their notions of it are, or in whatſoever they expect to find it, they perſuade themſelves that religion allows them an uncontrouled and unlimited licence.—How ſtrangely are theſe ſons of diſſipation and pleaſure ſurprized and diſappointed, when they come to attend in earneſt to the leſſons of religious wiſdom! when they are made to underſtand, that it diſpenſes its favours only in the ſchool of abſtinence and diſcipline, and that it makes no promiſe of eaſe or pleaſure to any but thoſe, who, by attention, labour, and habit, are proficients in the arts of ſelf-reſtraint and government! *Theſe are hard ſayings, who can bear them?* It is to be regretted, that too many, deceived through their own impetuoſity and folly, diſcover the ſame diſpoſition with the rich man in the goſpel, to whom eaſe and affluence were bleſſings too dear to ſacrifice, and depart ſorrowful*: or with Felix, under the preaching of Paul, reſiſt preſent conviction, and put off the mortification and labour of amendment, with the ſame vain and fooliſh excuſe; "Go thy way for this time; when I have a con-

* Matt. xix. 22.

"venient

"venient ſeaſon I will call for thee †."—But ſhould conviction prevail, and induce them to enter on a religious courſe, their firſt impetuoſity and ardour, however promiſing they appear, ſoon ſubſide; for want of *ſitting down and counting the coſt* ‡, all their good purpoſes languiſh and die, and they grow weary, in their very firſt attempts, of well doing.

It is true, religion has pleaſures peculiar to itſelf, and which no other ſource can furniſh:—but then, all its pleaſures are the purchaſe and recompence of previous labour: the human ſoul is ſo diſordered by ſin—its native rectitude and purity are ſo marred and polluted—its conſciouſneſs and reflection have received ſuch wounds, as to render religion at firſt rather a hard and unpleaſing ſervice; the guilt and dominion of ſin are not removed at once, nor without conſiderable pain and difficulty. Repentance is attended with ſelf-reproach and ſorrow; the firſt converſion of the ſoul to God requires a great degree of ſelf-denial and reſolution: it is no eaſy matter to reſtrain and ſubdue corrupt and licentious appetite, and to break off habits which long and frequent indulgence has wrought into the conſtitution of the ſoul, and made its ſecond nature.

The ſcriptures have therefore repreſented the firſt exerciſes of religion as painful and laborious; they have adopted all thoſe terms in deſcribing them which imply ſorrow and difficulty: Have

† Acts xxiv. 25. ‡ Luke xxiv. 28.

they not given tears to repentance—the pangs of a new birth to converſion? To mortify corrupt inclinations and evil habits is, in ſcripture language, to *pluck out a right eye*, and *to cut off a right hand**. Nor is the progreſs in the paths of religion, in a ſtate of ſo much enmity and danger as the preſent, to be maintained without unremitting diligence, zeal, and labour. *Striving*, *wreſtling*, *running*, and many more of the ſame import and emphaſis are the expreſſions uſed by the ſacred writers, and denote difficulty in the courſe itſelf and ſelf-exertion on our part.—Moſt of theſe expreſſions evidently refer to the Olympic, or other games of the ſame nature, which had been inſtituted in Greece, to promote in the youth of the country a ſpirit of emulation and vigour; and which were celebrated, at ſet intervals of time, near ſome of its principal cities. They abound more in the writings of Saint Paul than in thoſe of any other of the evangeliſts or apoſtles: he was, by way of eminence, the apoſtle of the Gentiles; and on this account frequently adopts thoſe ornaments and alluſions which were common to the writers of his age and country, and which were likely to recommend the great doctrines he preached to thoſe among whom he miniſtered.

The paſſage whence our text is taken, is, amongſt others, a continued alluſion to theſe Græcian games. "Know ye not (ſays the apoſ-

* Matt. v. 29, 30.

"tle)

" tle) that they which run in a race, run all, but " one receiveth the prize?" upon which he ſtops ſhort, and directs to them a practical exhortation, evidently implying the ſuperior excellence of the Chriſtian race, becauſe it propoſed an immenſe and incorruptible reward—not to him alone who firſt reached the goal, but to *all* who were faithful and perſevering in their purſuit of it. *So run that ye may obtain:* theſe words plainly ſuppoſe, that it is poſſible to run and not to obtain.—As ſelf-deception is, in this reſpect, inexpreſſibly dangerous, I ſhall take occaſion from theſe words to ſhew:

I. What are the neceſſary and eſſential qualifications of true religion?—When does religion become honourable to God and ourſelves, and entitled to his acceptance and reward?—Or, in other words, What is it to run that we may obtain?

II. To lay before you ſome of thoſe leading conſiderations, which may ſerve as motives to ſuch a religious courſe as we ſhall now deſcribe.

I am to ſhew,

I. What are the neceſſary and eſſential qualifications of true religion?—When does it become honourable to God and ourſelves, and entitled to his acceptance and reward?—What is it to run that we may obtain?——This ſuppoſes,

1. That we have actually entered on a religious courſe; and that our religion ſprings from choice and conviction. The

The competitors at the Græcian games voluntarily offered themſelves, and eſteemed it an honour to have their names accepted and enrolled by the ſuperintendent of the ceremonies; they were anxious to be admitted as candidates; they entered into the conteſt with an ardent ſenſe of the reputation and glory they had a chance of acquiring, and determined to exert themſelves to the utmoſt in the hope of victory.

In like manner, true religion is a voluntary ſervice. It is not the effect of compulſion or conſtraint. It ariſes from a perſuaſion of the judgment, and an inclination of the will. That heart which entertains a ſecret doubt of the reaſonableneſs and obligation of religion;—which is conſcious, to the loweſt degree of diſaffection, to any of its reſtraints and laws;—which can indulge a ſingle wiſh of retaining any beloved ſin, or violating any incumbent duty, is ſo far falſe to God and a ſtranger to true goodneſs. It reflects diſgrace on the worthieſt object of our eſteem, to allow any competition—to heſitate in our preference and choice—to maintain the neceſſity of a reſiſtleſs power to bend the will—or to make any partial or private intereſt the reaſon and foundation of our determination in its favour.

Nothing leſs than an entire conviction of its intrinſic fitneſs and beauty—of the excellence and honour of its laws, and the bleſſedneſs of its conſequences: nothing leſs than a free and hearty ſurrender of every faculty, inclination, and deſire

ſire to its authority and rule, can conſtitute a moral and religious character.—*A willing mind** is the firſt ſacrifice which God demands; and this is well-pleaſing and acceptable in his ſight. To love, and fear, and ſerve God, from a conviction of the excellence and amiableneſs of his nature and character—from a lively perſuaſion of the equity of his authority and laws—and of the right, which, in every view, he juſtly claims to our homage and obedience, is abſolutely neceſſary to render us objects of his favour and acceptance.—All inferior principles are baſe and dangerous.—No outward act of religion can be honourable to God or advantageous to man which is the effect of oſtentation, ambition, or intereſt; views, like theſe, pollute the moſt coſtly offerings, and render them abominations before God.

It becomes us therefore ſeriouſly to examine the principles and views from which we act. Let us bring our religion to this teſt: Is it the effect of conviction and choice? Have we felt any juſt concern for the long neglect of its ſacred and reaſonable obligations? Do we now engage in it as an indiſpenſible and incumbent duty?—from a full perſuaſion of its reaſonableneſs and importance? Can we lay open the moſt ſecret receſſes of our hearts before the all-ſeeing God, and ſay, with David, "Search us, O God, and know our "hearts—try us, and know our thoughts! and "ſee if there be any wicked way in us, and lead

* 1 Chron. xxviii. 9. 2 Cor. viii. 12.

"us

"us in the way everlasting*." *If our hearts condemn us not, then shall we have confidence towards God* †.

It is dangerous to deceive ourselves at the beginning of our race. We shall feel and lament the ill influence of wrong principles imbibed at first through the whole of our course. Blind zeal is apt soon to cool and subside. Nothing but an understanding in some measure enlightened and fully convinced, can keep alive the flame of pious zeal in the human heart, and cause it to burn brighter and steadier through all the varying scenes of life. All partial and private interest is of fluctuating and fickle obligation; and, were it a justifiable principle of goodness, would never bear up against those difficulties with which we must expect to struggle.—*The form of godliness without the power* ‡—the external appearance of religion, without the heart, may indeed answer all the purposes of convenience and interest we can wish at present; *But God cannot be mocked* §: All that devotion, and charity, and zeal, which are actuated by base and sinister intentions—which flow not from a persuasion and sentiment of the heart, and which have no reference to the will and glory and favour of God, are noted down as crimes in his book, and will be of no avail in that great day, when the *secrets of all hearts shall be revealed.*

* Psal. cxxxix. 23, 24. † John iii. 21.
‡ 2 Tim. iii. 5. § Gal. vi. 7.

Many (ſays our Lord ‖) *ſhall ſay unto me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not propheſied in thy name? and in thy name caſt out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? Then ſhall I profeſs unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.*

2. "That religion which God will accept and "reward, muſt be the governing concern and "buſineſs of life." This muſt employ our chief attention and labour;—hither ſhould all our purpoſes, ſchemes, and cares be directed. This, indeed, will be the caſe, if our minds are poſſeſt with juſt ſentiments of its importance and value. How neceſſary this is will be acknowledged by all who are convinced of the extent of its authority and obligation—of the difficulties and dangers to which it is expoſed, and of the ineffable conſequences connected with it.

What ſelf-reſtraint, and temperate regimen, and previous exerciſe, did the candidates in the Olympic games chearfully ſubmit to, in order to acquire agility and ſtrength for a ſucceſsful conteſt?

No one who ſeriouſly conſiders the indiſpoſition of the heart to religious exerciſes—the inward treachery and outward oppoſition and enmity to which religion is expoſed—the holineſs and purity of the great God—the extent and ſtrictneſs of his laws—the various duties it commands, and the virtues it enjoins—can think re-

‖ Matt. vii. 22, 23.

ligion a trifling or unintereſting concern; and that a few moments of a ſhort and fleeting life will be ſufficient to anſwer all its demands. It is no eaſy matter, it requires time and labour, to overcome that rooted enmity to God and goodneſs which has taken place in the ſoul—to commence a reconciliation with the offended Sovereign of the univerſe—to eſtabliſh ſuch a friendſhip as will be honourable and laſting;—to acquire thoſe holy affections, that ſanctified taſte and temper, which will ſecure an inheritance in the regions of purity and bleſſedneſs.

Religion can never be ſincere or acceptable if it has not the principal, the ſupreme ſeat in the heart; if all the cares and enjoyments of life are not ſubſervient to it; becauſe as nothing elſe is of equal importance, nothing ſhould command an equal attention and ſolicitude: the mind ſhould be always preſerved in a fit ſtate to entertain this gueſt: it ſhould always poſſeſs the chief place, and no intruder ſhould be allowed which might offend or injure it.

Though religion may not always be in exerciſe, it ſhould always have a being. Though it may not always exert its authority or evince its ſway, its authority and ſway ſhould be ever maintained ſovereign and uncontrouled. True religion will not oſtentatiouſly ſhew itſelf—herein it differs from enthuſiaſm and ſuperſtition; nor, on the other hand, will it ſtudiouſly conceal itſelf—be aſhamed or afraid of a diſcovery—when a proper

a proper occaſion offers, it will aſſert and maintain its claims againſt every allurement or violation.

Strictneſs in religion, ſo that it be kept from degenerating into formality and ſuperſtition, is eſſential to its being and expreſly enjoined both by precept and example in the word of God.

Our Saviour tells his diſciples, that it was *his meat to do the will of his heavenly Father* * — *he went about continually doing good* †: he did not think it ſufficient to devote a few hours of his life, at ſet intervals of time, to the purpoſes of piety and devotion. How often do we read of his retiring from his diſciples, after the laborious ſervices of the day, and whilſt they refreſhed themſelves by ſleep, to ſome private place to pray! *He has ſet us an example, that we might follow his ſteps* ‡. How many exhortations to the ſame purpoſe do we meet with in the ſacred writings! *Seek ye firſt the kingdom of God and his righteouſneſs.—Labour not for the meat which periſheth, but for that which endureth unto everlaſting life.—Whatſoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might.—Walk circumſpectly, redeeming the time.—Lay aſide every weight, and the ſin which moſt eaſily beſets you, and run with patience the race ſet before you* ‖. Theſe exhortations, and a variety of others which might be added, plainly ſuppoſe,

* John iv. 34. † Acts x. 38. ‡ 1 Pet. ii. 21.
‖ Matt. vi. 33. John vi. 27. Eccleſ. ix. 10. Eph. v. 15, 16. Heb. xii. 1.

" that religion is to be conſidered as the great " concern and buſineſs of human life."

3. " Acceptable religion muſt be attended with " alacrity, zeal, and vigour."

Not ſlothful in buſineſs, fervent in ſpirit, ſerving the Lord *, is the apoſtolic exhortation. A lifeleſs, unanimated religion is a body without the quickening ſpirit.

Indifference and lukewarmneſs in religion are altogether inexcuſable; they betray a criminal ignorance of, or inattention to, its principles and views, and a wretched inſenſibility to the pleaſures with which it is always accompanied.

To be religious, and yet to be uninſpired by a ſacred ardour of affection—to be unacquainted with peace and joy—with that freedom, ſtrength, and activity of mind which are the certain effects of religion, is a contradiction. The ſoul, in which the love of God and goodneſs, and a lively faith in things inviſible, are the predominant principles, feels the influence of thoſe principles, and is powerfully conſtrained by them to every good word and work: it is conſcious to pleaſure—it acquires enlargement and vigour in the diſcharge of every duty.

Religion opens ſo many ſources of enlivening joy—it furniſhes ſuch powerful motives to alacrity and zeal, that none of its votaries, without diſhonouring and reproaching their profeſſion, can remain dejected, ſorrowful, and inactive. Re-

* Rom. xii. 11.

ligion

ligion is to the ſoul what health is to the body; it invigorates and enlivens all its faculties; it gives power as well as pleaſure, and calls forth into action every principle and every affection of man.

Moreover, alacrity and zeal in religion are not only evidences of its exiſtence, and effects of its power, but abſolutely neceſſary to any comfortable or continued progreſs.

That religion which has not engaged the paſſions on its ſide, will be gloomy and joyleſs while it laſts, and will gradually languiſh and die.—Such is the conſtitution of man, that, if theſe are not for it, they will be againſt it: and little can be expected from diſcordant and contending principles. When reaſon and paſſion are ſo far from acting in conjunction, that they are at perpetual war with one another, religion will ſenſibly ſuffer. And to this purpoſe we may obſerve, that ſpiritual declenſions firſt appear in the inferior ſprings of action; as theſe weaken, or become corrupt, conviction loſes power: but when conviction and ſentiment unite—when the underſtanding and affections tend the ſame way, the progreſs in religion will be more ſpeedy and more viſible.

Deſire, emulation, and hope, under the direction and controul of a well-informed judgment, give vigour and firmneſs to the mind; they ſerve as ſails to receive the gales of divine influence, and to waft the ſoul through the ocean of

life

life to the heaven of eternal ſecurity and bleſſedneſs.

Beſides, when the great duties of religion are diſcharged with zeal and pleaſure, much may be done in little time. Life at beſt is ſhort, and the work we have to do is inconceivably great: ſhould not every fleeting moment be ſeized with ardour—be diligently and thriftily improved? *Thus ſhall we renew our ſtrength—mount up with wings as eagles—run and not be weary—walk and not faint* *. *It is good to be zealouſly affected always in a good thing* †. Zeal according to knowledge reflects honour on the religion we profeſs, and will be moſt likely to ſecure our preſent comfort and final felicity.

4. If we would run ſo as to obtain, "our religion muſt be accompanied with watchfulneſs "and caution." *We muſt take heed to our ſteps, according to the divine word* ‡.

If through inattention we fall into temptation and a ſnare, our progreſs is impeded and our ſtrength enfeebled. One wilful error is of inconceivable danger: it not only interrupts but detains us in our courſe; it brings us back to the beginning of our race, and makes it neceſſary for us to trace anew the rugged ſteps of ſorrow and repentance.

Our zeal muſt be lively, but not blind and precipitant. One miſcarriage leads to another: our

* Iſa. xl. 31. † Gal. iv. 18.

‡ Pſal. cxix. 9.

time

time is loſt, and before we have inclination or ſtrength to recover ourſelves, *the things of our peace may be hid from our eyes**. True religion makes the eye of the mind vigilant and the conſcience tender—it is never off its guard; or, ſhould a temptation ſurprize it, it either repels the ſhaft, or inſtantly recovers without much injury.

Vigilance and caution are repreſented as eſſential qualifications of genuine religion in numberleſs paſſages of the ſacred ſcriptures. Hiſtory, parable, and precept, unite to teach us their neceſſity and importance. Who can call to mind the hiſtory of David or Peter without this conviction? Who can read the parable of the wheat and tares and not acknowledge the neceſſity of always watching? *While men ſlept the enemy came and ſowed tares among the wheat, and went his way*†. How often has our Lord repeated the ſame caution, *Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation*‡! Who that is acquainted with the deceitfulneſs of the human heart—who that has a becoming ſenſe of his innumerable errors—of the power which temptation has over him—can otherwiſe than approve of the caution which the apoſtle has laid down, *Let him that thinketh he ſtandeth, take heed leſt he fall* ‖.

5. The laſt qualification of a ſincere and acceptable religion I ſhall mention is this, namely,

* Luke xix. 42. † Matt. xiii. 25.
‡ Luke xxii. 46. ‖ 1 Cor. x. 12.

" that

"that it be conſtant and perſevering." Many have ſet out in a courſe of religion with a fair and promiſing appearance, have outdone others in outward devotion and zeal, and have been ready to cenſure their want of equal fervour; and yet in a little while have gradually declined from the way of God's commandments, and loſt all the benefit of their good beginning. How juſtly has our Saviour deſcribed ſuch in his illuſtration of the parable of the ſower: *He that received the ſeed into ſtony places, the ſame is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himſelf, but endureth for a while; for when tribulation or perſecution ariſeth, becauſe of the word, by and by he is offended:—He alſo that received ſeed among the thorns is he that heareth the word, and the cares of this world, and the deceitfulneſs of riches, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful* *.

The reward is promiſed only to him who holdeth out to the end and overcometh: *Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee the crown of life* †. True religion is diſtinguiſhed from all falſe appearances by its uniformity and perſeverance. Inſtead of loſing, it is continually gaining ground—enlarging and eſtabliſhing its empire.—Theſe are like thoſe glittering meteors whoſe origin is the earth, which flaſh for a little while and then vaniſh away. Whereas true religion is the work of God, and ſhineth, like the ſun, more

* Matt. xiii. 20, 21. † Rev. ii. 10.

and

and more to the perfect day. The apoſtle Paul, in his account of himſelf, has given us the true characters of genuine goodneſs: *Not as though I had already attained, or were already perfect; but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which alſo I am apprehended of Chriſt Jeſus. Brethren, I count not myſelf to have apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting thoſe things that are behind, and reaching forth unto thoſe things which are before, I preſs towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Chriſt Jeſus* *.

I now proceed,

II. To lay before you ſome of thoſe conſiderations which may engage and invite to that courſe of religion above deſcribed.

Theſe are ſo numerous that I can do little more than mention ſome of the principal. Conſider,

1. The nature and value of the reward to which this courſe of religion entitles you.

The contenders in the Græcian games ſpared no pains in previous preparation—they ſtrained every nerve in the view of their reward: now they did it to obtain a corruptible crown—a crown of fading laurel: but we are required to run the heavenly race, in order to obtain an incorruptible and eternal crown. *To him* (ſays our Lord) *that overcometh, will I grant to ſit with me in my throne, even as I alſo overcame, and am ſet down with my Father in his throne* †.

* Phil. iii. 12, 13, 14. † Rev. iii. 21.

However ſelf-denying and difficult this courſe of religion may appear, abſolutely conſidered, yet in the view of ſo immenſe a reward as the goſpel propoſes; a reward connected with, and in ſome meaſure ariſing out of it, all the difficulty and labour muſt vaniſh.

It is a reward, in extent and duration, above the power of imagination at preſent to conceive; it includes every bleſſing we can wiſh, and ſecures the uninterrupted gratification of all our wiſhes through eternity. Do we now lament our ignorance? In the enjoyment of this reward we ſhall be for knowledge as the angels of God. Do we labour under dejection and doubt? This will ſatisfy every doubt—raiſe and chear every deſponding mind. Does the ſenſe of remaining imperfections and ſins fill us with pain and dread? No guilty reflections can purſue us with terror into the heavenly world: we ſhall then be complete in holineſs and bliſs. Do the afflictions of life grieve and diſtreſs us? the bleſt know no ſickneſs nor ſorrow. Were our faith in the glorious realities of the heavenly world a more lively and ſteady principle, it would raiſe us ſuperior to every difficulty in our way to it: could we regard all our preſent ſtruggles and victories as the ſteps whereby we aſcend to our Father's houſe, where are manſions provided for us, we ſhould engage with vigour, and eſteem it an honour to have our faith and virtue tried: could we keep in conſtant view that glorious object which faith preſents,

preſents, the great Redeemer of man at the end of our courſe holding forth the crown of life—ready to beſtow it on the triumphant victor; we ſhould aſpire after it—we ſhould preſs towards it though earth and hell oppoſed our progreſs.

Conſider,

2. " The certainty of obtaining this reward." The reward which God beſtows by Chriſt Jeſus is offered to all them who, by *patient continuance in well doing ſeek for glory, honour, and immortality* *. The candidates in the Græcian games all run, but one received the prize: in the heavenly race none ſhall run in vain; the promiſe is unto all of every nation, in every age; all ſhall be made happy according to the extent of their capacities and wiſhes. The mercy of God and the grace of the goſpel are boundleſs: though myriads have already entered into the heavenly world, yet ſtill there is room. Our Lord Jeſus Chriſt is the author of eternal ſalvation unto all—unto all, without exception or partiality, who obey him †. Nothing can exclude any from final happineſs, but their own obſtinate impenitence and diſobedience.

Let us conſider,

3. " That in running our chriſtian race we are " obſerved by a multitude of ſpectators, who are " anxious for our ſucceſs, or who would rejoice " in our fall."

The eyes of the world are upon us—men, angels, and the ſpirits of darkneſs obſerve our con-

* Rom. ii. 7. † Heb. v. 9.

duct—all good men on earth, and all the glorified ſpirits of heaven watch every ſtep we take, and attend us with their beſt wiſhes—all the children of diſobedience and malignant ſpirits view us with envy, and are filled with malicious joy when we halt or fall—nay further, the eye of the great God is upon us; he beholds us with pity and favour in our faithful attempts to quit ourſelves like men and to be ſtrong. Shall we diſappoint the expectations—ſhall we fruſtrate the joy of thoſe benevolent beings who are friends to our beſt intereſt? Shall we give them pain by wilful and habitual miſcarriages? Shall we forfeit the approbation, and render ourſelves unworthy the ſmiles of Chriſt and of God? *Whilſt we are encompaſſed with ſuch a cloud of witneſſes, let us run with patience the race ſet before us* *. Let our ſouls be inſpired with the divine emulation of ſpreading joy through the tabernacles of ſaints on earth, and through the regions of the bleſt above. "O my ſoul, art thou a ſpectacle to angels "and men! Be ſtedfaſt and immoveable: never "grow weary of well-doing till thou haſt reached "the goal, and are united to the aſſembly of the "church of the firſt-born, whoſe names are writ-"ten in the book of life. Thus ſhalt thou ap-"pear with honour before the dread tribunal "of the univerſal Judge, and commence an "everlaſting acquaintance and friendſhip with "thoſe exalted and benign ſpirits who are inviſi-"ble to eyes of fleſh." Conſider,

* Heb. xii. 1.

4. "That

4. "That we are not only obſerved, but di-
"rected and aided in our courſe by unerring
"wiſdom and almighty influence." We *are ſtrong in the Lord and by the power of his might* *. *God giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might he increaſeth ſtrength* †.

Conſider in the laſt place,

5. "The momentary and uncertain duration
"of our ſtate of conflict and trial." This thought ſhould quicken our progreſs and actuate every good reſolution and labour. This conſideration, on the one hand, and the extent of religious obligation on the other, ſhould engage us to begin ſoon, and to conſecrate every hour to the buſineſs of religion. How can thoſe anſwer it to God or themſelves—how can they anſwer it at the bar of common prudence—who put off from day to day, and from year to year, a concern ſo ineffably important as the ſalvation of their own ſouls! a concern which requires ſo much attention and labour properly to ſecure—and which they have no ſingle moment for doing, abſolutely in their own power, beſides the preſent! Moreover, the thought of the ſhort duration of human life ſhould reconcile us to the difficulties of our race; be it ever ſo laborious or painful it will ſoon be at an end: the preſent is the only ſcene of toil and danger; all beyond the grave is ſecurity and enjoyment: after a few conflicts more the laſt will come; our conflict with the king of terrors

* Eph. vi. 10. † Iſa. xl. 29.

will

will close the scene of discipline—death will open for us the gate into the paradise of God, where no enemy shall annoy us more!

But oh! what a dismal reverse is the condition of those who run in the broad road of sin and misery! death is the beginning of their sorrows—all beyond is despair and woe unutterable!

From what has been said we see,

(1.) "The necessity and importance of entering betimes on a religious course." The security and pleasure of our progress, as well as our final acceptance and happiness, in a great measure, depend on our beginning soon, and on our beginning from just principles and views. Those who defer religion to riper age or declining years, only enthral themselves, and increase the obstacles to their reformation and felicity; they neglect that season of youth which is, of all others, the fittest for this purpose, and fix on a distant and uncertain period, in which both their inclination and abilities for the exercises of religious goodness will be much more corrupt and feeble than they are at present. Do they not in this respect act against the conviction and better judgment of their own minds? Whence arises their present indisposition to a course of religion and virtue? Does it not arise from the apprehension of self-denial and difficulty? And can they expect these objections will be removed by their delay? Have they not reason rather to conclude,

that

that theſe will increaſe with every wilful neglect, and with every criminal indulgence?

If we now, Sirs, apprehend repentance and reformation, though a neceſſary, a hard and unpleaſant taſk, how much greater reaſon ſhall we have to look upon them in this view in every future period? Paſſion by indulgence gains an aſcendency and dominion over the mind: vice perſiſted in enſlaves and enfeebles the powers of the ſoul: bad habits take deeper root and gain ſtrength and obſtinacy by the frequent repetition of our crimes and follies. The tender twig is more eaſily bent than the knotted oak; and ſo is preſent and early penitence and amendment much leſs difficult and painful than penitence and amendment deferred.

If the apprehenſion of the difficulty and unpleaſantneſs of the work induces our delay of it; this will operate much more ſtrongly in every future period. Suppoſe that our diſpoſitions and reſolutions continue as vigorous as they are now, and now, alas! they are ineffectual to any good purpoſe! the obſtacles we ſhall have to overcome will be much more mighty and formidable. Vice is a path that continually tends downward—there is no ſtay in a courſe of ſin; if we do not become better we ſhall certainly grow worſe; at firſt we ſhall be borne down by a more gentle current, which might be more eaſily oppoſed, into a more rapid torrent, and by this into a boiſterous ocean, the billows of which, without mighty

efforts and extraordinary influence, will ſink our boaſted ſtrength into deſpair, and wholly overwhelm us.

But what renders our caſe ſtill more deſperate is, the conſideration—that our good diſpoſitions and reſolutions will be gradually corrupted and weakened—we may not be conſcious even to the inclination of ever making religion the ſubject of our attention and concern.

To defer religion now with an intention of regarding it hereafter, is a ſpecious, but has often proved a fatal ſelf-deception: the ſame, or even ſtronger objections than thoſe which deter us now will deter us always; and we ſhall put off the work of life to the moſt improper ſeaſon of all, when the pains and terrors of death ſhall lay hold on us, and when it will be more than enough for us to ſtruggle with the infirmities and agonies of diſſolving nature.

Since the ſinner muſt always expect difficulties at his firſt entrance on a religious courſe—ſince theſe difficulties continually increaſe, the farther he advances—ſince his inclination and ſtrength to overcome them grow proportionably weaker—ſince he has daily leſs reaſon to expect extraordinary aſſiſtance, without which, at any period, his own beſt attempts muſt fail of ſucceſs—it is ſurely his wiſdom to make a preſent pauſe—to retreat immediately from the alluring and deſtructive path—*to make haſte and not to delay to keep the commandments of God.*

Let

Let him ſeriouſly conſider what his reſolution of future reformation implies. Does it not imply this unaccountable perverſeneſs and abſurdity, that he is determined to embrace that opportunity for this purpoſe which is the moſt unfavourable—in which he is the leaſt likely to ſucceed—and in which, if he does ſucceed, it muſt be with ten-fold anguiſh and labour?

To you, my young friends, I would addreſs myſelf eſpecially on this ſubject:

You are ready to conceive of religion as gloomy and joyleſs, as requiring perpetual mortification and ſelf-denial, and as an enemy to your amuſements and pleaſures. As far as your amuſements and pleaſures are allowable and innocent, ſuch a notion is a very falſe and unjuſtifiable one: it will deprive you of no gratifications which you will not ſooner or later wiſh you had abſtained from—which are not in the end accompanied with bitterneſs and regret. It is attended with no reſtraints—with no mortifications which you will not hereafter find much more grievous and intolerable than at preſent.—Riper or declining years, ſhould Providence continue life, will bring with them their peculiar temptations and infirmities; and you will have reaſon to lament, if you are religious at all, that you did not apply to religion ſooner. Can the Æthiopian change his ſkin or the leopard his ſpots? are the ſtrong figures which the prophet uſes to expreſs the moral impoſſibility of

a late reformation: then ſhall thoſe who are accuſtomed to do evil learn to do well. I infer,

(2.) "The unſpeakable advantages of a religious education." Every argument which can be made uſe of to recommend early religion has its full force in recommending the religious education of youth. Happy are they who have enjoyed this bleſſing! happy are they who have it in their power to beſtow it on others! How laudable and how worthy of encouragement is every deſign and inſtitution which propoſe the reſcue of innocent and helpleſs youth from ignorance, vice, and ruin! Of this kind is that charitable plan which beſpeaks your attention at this time; and which, in moving accents, implores the aid of your benevolence. A ſtate of which, drawn up by the worthy managers, I am deſired to communicate.

"The foundation of this ſchool was laid in the "year 1687, in the reign of King James II. when "a ſchool was ſet up by one Poulton a Jeſuit, "and public notice was given that he would in-"ſtruct the children of the poor gratis. Upon "which Mr. Arthur Shallet, Mr. Samuel War-"burton, and Mr. Ferdinando Holland, laid the "foundation of this ſchool to avoid the danger-"ous conſequences of a popiſh ſchool, and pro-"vide for the inſtruction of the children of the "poor in the proteſtant way. The number of "ſcholars at firſt was forty, afterwards increaſed "to fifty, but now to two hundred. They are

"taught

" taught to read, write, and cypher, and thereby
" qualified for the ſervice of God and man. It
" may be ſaid to be the firſt ſchool the proteſ-
" tant Diſſenters were concerned in; and here
" objects are received without diſtinction of par-
" ties, the common good being intended. It is
" ſituated in one of the pooreſt parts of this city,
" and the children of the pooreſt ſort, of water-
" men, fiſhermen, and others, are here taught
" without any expence to their parents, and are
" furniſhed with ſpelling-books, teſtaments, cate-
" chiſms, writing and cyphering books; and
" the girls are taught to ſew and knit.

" The charges have been defrayed by the gifts
" and ſubſcriptions of private perſons, with two
" annual collections, and the kind remembrance
" of the ſaid ſchool by ſome in their laſt wills."

From this account we ſee, that this ſchool was inſtituted to prevent the return and growing influence of popiſh ſuperſtition: an evil, the moſt diſtant approaches of which muſt fill all good minds with concern and terror, as eſſentially deſtructive to all the ſacred intereſts of truth, liberty, and religion. What more prudent or more effectual means can be employed for this purpoſe than the early inſtruction of the riſing generation? and eſpecially of thoſe poor, who, from the narrowneſs of their circumſtances, are incapable of obtaining this bleſſing—and who, in the want of it, will be in no ſmall danger of being ſeduced and wrought upon by thoſe artful emiſſaries of Rome,

who lie in wait to deceive. It is to be wiſhed, there was leſs reaſon to recommend this charity to your benevolent regards from this conſideration alone. Many and too well grounded are the alarms of the progreſs of this dangerous ſyſtem in our own days. We are therefore bound by all our juſt regard to the principles we have imbibed, and wiſh to tranſmit in their full extent and free influence to the lateſt poſterity, to countenance and encourage every deſign that tends to oppoſe its progreſs and to diminiſh its influence. Its ſovereign refuge is ignorance: if we provide for the inſtruction of all ranks of men, and lead them to an early acquaintance with the ſacred Scriptures, the only rule of our faith and practice, we ſhall, by the divine bleſſing, contribute effectually to the prevention of this threatening evil.

Let me lead you likewiſe to conſider the objects of this charity, as they are repreſented to us in the ſtate of the ſchool juſt read. They are the children of the poor—of the pooreſt and moſt deſtitute amongſt us—and perhaps of thoſe who, of themſelves, would be leaſt inclined to take the neceſſary pains, if their time and capacity would admit, for the inſtruction of their own children. They are the children of the poor, without partiality or diſtinction: and I am perſuaded the benevolence and candour of the plan will be no ſmall recommendation to thoſe who now hear me.

Conſider

Conſider further the number of thoſe who are hereby relieved. Under the beſt conduct ſo great a number requires no ſmall expence: and it would give pleaſure to the worthy managers of it, to be enabled to enlarge their plan, and to diffuſe their charity to an increaſing number of objects.

Let me add, that this benevolent inſtitution is not liable to that objection which has been often urged againſt other ſchools on public foundations: their mode of education does not raiſe the children above that lower ſphere of life for which Providence deſigned them.

There are many views in which inſtitutions of this kind highly recommend themſelves to our eſteem, aſſiſtance, and good wiſhes. Conſider them in their influence on the world—in their aſpect on generations yet unborn. Conſider them as reſcuing the hope of the preſent and future generations from penury, idleneſs, and vice—as means of forming members for the community—of fiting them for uſeful employments, and of ſecuring to them the comfortable enjoyments of life. In theſe views they claim a tribute of praiſe and encouragement, to which my wiſhes alone are equal.

But when they are conſidered ſtill further, as an aſylum and ſeminary for immortal ſouls—ſouls capable of religion and made for eternity—we trace their bleſt effects beyond the narrow limits of this tranſitory ſtate. We are hereby led to conceive of them as extending their influence through eternal ages. Should only one ſoul be

ſaved

ſaved by theſe means from preſent vice and eternal perdition, all the attention, labour, and wealth, which are ſo vigorouſly beſtowed on this inſtitution, will be abundantly recompenſed—every contributor will have reaſon to rejoice in his labour of love; for that *one* ſoul is of greater value than the whole world. But, bleſſed be God! this inſtitution is ſo wiſely formed, and ſo well conducted as to afford a reaſonable proſpect of ſaving many, many precious ſouls.

What ſatisfaction and joy muſt this reflection excite in the breaſt of every one who contributes to its ſupport, that what is laid out in this way is converted into a durable ſubſtance—that this is making friends of the mammon of unrighteouſneſs—and laying up treaſures in heaven, where neither moth nor ruſt do corrupt, and where thieves break not through nor ſteal—that they ſhall ſee in another and happier ſcene of being the glorious conſequences of their wealth thus employed.

Let us all unite in our beſt wiſhes and warmeſt prayers, that a deſign in every reſpect ſo important and valuable, may not only long ſubſiſt—but be greatly enlarged, and anſwer every happy purpoſe which its patrons and friends can propoſe. And for this end I chearfully leave it with the well-diſpoſed and benevolent who are now preſent.

7 JU 66

FINIS.